

Martial Unity 171

Chapter 171: Breakdown

"Pleasure to meet you too." Rui replied. He said, not taking his eyes off her.

"Well." Barnard shrugged. "If Neira is vouching for him, that's good enough." He turned to Rui. "Do you wish to reveal your identity?"

Rui shook his head. "I'd like to stay anonymous, thank you."

The Martial Union had reserved the right, on behalf of its Martial Artists, for its Martial Artists to conceal their identities and personal information while engaging in Royal commissions. This was a right that the Royal Family had conceded very reluctantly.

The reason the Martial Union had pushed for retaining this right was because it was far too dangerous to allow the Kandrian government and the Royal Family access to such data. Once the Royal Family learnt of their identity, the Martial Artists of the Martial Union could forget retaining any privacy. The Martial Union was simply unwilling to tolerate such a leak in information.

Barnard snorted, not saying another word about the matter, before asking. "How do you want us to address you?"

Rui thought for a second, before replying. "You can call me John."

He told them his name on Earth in his previous life.

"Well John." Barnard continued. "Have you memorized all relevant information?"

Rui nodded, before Barnard fired a series of questions that Rui cleanly answered, earning Barnard's grudging approval.

"We've been told you're an all-rounder with some degree of sensory and stealth capabilities." Neira said to him.

Rui nodded. "I have mastered Seismic Mapping and Blink."

"Good." Neira nodded. "Your Seismic Mapping together with my Thermal Eye, and we'll surely be able to ensure that the ringleader won't escape detection."

Rui raised his eyes at those words. Thermal Eye was a sensory technique he had seen in the Apprentice Library, it was quite pricey and difficult to master, this technique would surely be quite an asset for the operation.

"Alright gather around. We have two hours before the operation dispatch, we'll be going over the plan one last time." Barnard declared. The men immediately gathered, forming a circle around their leader, who had drawn out a map and had placed it on the table.

"The goal of this operation elimination, capture and rescue. The target locations of the raid operation range from the third block to the fifth block in the nineteenth district." Barnard said. "The participant squads of this operation are squads A28, D13, C34, D21, E62, F16, B02 and K23."

He paused before continuing. "Squad A28 will cover the first half of the third block." he said, indicating the area on map with a pen.

"Squad D13 the second half of the third block."

"Squad C34 the first half of the fourth block."

...

He continued reciting the target locations assigned to each participating squad. He went into many more details such as the infiltration means, the assigned gear, the protocol hierarchy and the many courses of actions that they were supposed to undertake under different possible scenarios.

Rui listened on with a vague interest in regards to how much planning and organization that even a relatively simple and straightforward operation such as this one required. It wasn't enough to say "let's jump in, defeat the bad guys, catch the villain and save the good guys". In any given operation, there were many things that could go wrong, and many things that could happen, the planning, organization and protocols existed to minimize the probability that something went wrong or unexpected that could disrupt the operation and lead to failure.

Soon, Barnard turned his attention to Rui and Neira.

"The two of you have only one objective in this mission: Preventing the escape of the ringleader or any Martial Artist." He said. "Scenario A: If there are no Martial Artists involved then you will aid the operation as parts squads A28 and D13."

"Scenario B: If there is a single Martial Apprentice, you will both focus your efforts on capturing them."

"Scenario C: If there are more than one Martial Apprentices, you will both cooperate on apprehending the closest Martial Apprentice to you."

"Scenario D: If there are multiple Martial Apprentices and one of them is the ringleader, you will focus your efforts on capturing the ringleader." He concluded. "At all times, maintain your sensory techniques and ensure nothing slips pass your detection. Neira, you will be in charge in relaying your reports once separated from the squads. The two of you will infiltrate the target locations ahead of time and be prepared for the emergence of hostile Martial Artists."

He added one final thing. "Above all else, do not let the ringleader escape. Do whatever needs to be done, we would rather her dead than alive and free."

Neira nodded, throwing a side smile at Rui. "Looking forward to working with you."

"Looking forward to working with you too." Rui glanced at her with interest. "Our of curiosity, what type of Martial Art do you practice?"

"I'm a close-range counter-offense specialist." She replied. "Generally I specialize in attacking while defending and using my opponent's power, speed and movements against them rather than my own."

"Interesting..." Rui murmured. The description of her style reminded Rui of certain martial arts fighting styles from Earth. Aikido from Japan and Krav Maga from Israel, specifically. These two martial arts specialized in using the opponent's power, and movements against them. Aikido placed a special focus on attacking the opponent's balance while Krav Maga focus on attacking the vital and vulnerable areas of the body that were exposed by the opponent's movements.

However, on Earth Aikido was not a very practical martial art as it was practiced in the modern era and Krav Maga was just dirty fighting systemized to some degree, it was illegal in most sports.

Still, the Martial Art in Gaea was far superior that on Earth, and was no meagre sport. So, he expected that she was quite formidable despite having a Martial Art that would have been quite dubious back on Earth.

He looked forward to seeing her in action.

Chapter 172: True Mission

Rui observed as the teams prepared for the operation, the sheer amount of gear that they had access to made the standard gear that the Martial Union offered look like toys in comparison.

Granted, Martial Artists didn't need a wealth of tools and devices as much as ordinary humans did.

But even Neira was equipped with a much more sophisticated combat uniform with visibly greater functionality than his own, making him look humble in turn.

Soon it was time for the operation to commence. Neira and Rui were supposed to be dispatched separately from the agents, and would infiltrate the area and hide in a particular spot until the operation begun.

The reason for this was that it was quite likely that the ring likely had scouts conducting surveillance, Neira and Rui had a much likelier chance of running into hostile Martial Artists as long as they didn't appear with the main raid force. They would join the main force once the latter had infiltrated the area.

"Alright, the operation has commenced." Special agent Barnard told Neira and Rui. "Execute phase one immediately."

The two of them nodded and entered a stationed supply carriage in the dispatch facility immediately. This horse-drawn carriage would take them to the center of the district and a staged 'breakdown' of the carriage would occur, stranding them in the center.

An hour after they were dispatched, and the breakdown occurred, Neira pressed a button on one of the devices she had. She nodded to Rui, indicating she had completed their role. Now, they would wait for the main raid force to come.

The carriage was a supply carriage and had no windows, so Rui couldn't even look outside to inspect the surroundings, furthermore, conversing was against protocol as well. Although the chances were slim, it could jeopardize the mission, there did exist techniques that could allow Martial Artists to listen in on conversations from a great distance away.

The two of them had already activated their sensory techniques. Neira narrowed her eyes as she perceived the infrared radiation influx and deciphered it to be able to perceive heat signatures of across the entire area. While Rui closed his eyes and mapped out the topography of the area via Seismic Sensing.

They both sensed an equal distribution of people across the entire area, and it was hard to say where the base was.

Then Neira's eyes narrowed, she glanced at Rui and mouthed the word 'children' to Rui, before taking her device and punching in some more buttons. Rui realized she must have sensed captive children in the area at some point. This was the confirmation that all the intel they had on the situation was accurate. Neira had relayed the information to the main raid team, and the two of the Martial Artists would coordinate with the raid team through already established plans and courses of actions.

Soon, the time had come.

Rui could feel the atmosphere growing more and more tense. Part of it was because of himself, of course. This mission wasn't just another mission, the personal importance it had to him made him takt

this much more seriously than he ever would any other mission with the remuneration that this mission had.

Rui perceived the automatic carriages that the main raid team was supposed to use, from a great distance away via his Seismic Mapping. He opened his eyes, briefly nodding to Neira and showed four fingers to Neira, earning a nod of understanding from her.

They were four minutes away. The main raid would commence the moment they arrived. Rui's Seismic Mapping had a much greater range than Neira's Thermal Eye, he was in charge of keeping an eye on the activation of Apprentice-level techniques and the arrival of the main raid force.

Soon, motorized vehicles could be heard, Rui could feel them circling the target areas and one-by-one, they all got out.

The actual infiltration of the main raid force wasn't supposed to be a covert operation. They came in from the front, surrounded the area with a great number of men and vehicles.

They quickly brought explosives that they rigged to the front doors of their target infiltration locations.

BOOM

BOOM

BOOM

The second the explosives went off, Neira and Rui jumped out of the carriage and immediately infiltrated the area along with the main raid force. They ignored ordinary men, the trained professionals of the Kandrian Bureau of Investigation were more than enough to handle the low-lives, and they were armed with all kinds of weapons, including muskets!

Instead, they focused their senses on anything resembling a Martial Apprentice. A hostile Martial Apprentice likely would not know that there were two Martial Artists within the raid force. After all, the two of them had been careful not to use any Apprentice-level techniques.

As they kept a sharp eye open for Martial Artists, Rui could sense that the rest of the operation was going well, the raid force had yet to suffer a single casualty as they swiftly brought down the traffickers with projectiles and hand-held weapons.

Every once in a while, Rui and Neira ran into a musket wielding trafficker who shot projectiles at them, but it was hopeless. Martial Apprentices possessed heightened superhuman kinetic vision and reflexes, by the time their human opponents managed to pull the trigger, Neira and Rui were already long out of the way of the projectiles. Human movements appeared in slow-motion to them, they didn't even need Apprentice-level maneuvering techniques to avoid the projectiles.

BOOM

Both Neira and Rui froze as the latter sensed one particular individual in the center of the targeted area began giving out intense seismic radiation that no human ought to be able to produce!

They exchanged glances, nodding at each other.

('Martial Apprentice.') Rui thought to himself, as he steeled his gaze. They both sprinted away as Neira punched some buttons on her device to indicate that they had located their target and were in pursuit.

The true mission had begun.

Chapter 173: End of the Continent

Rui closed his eyes as he ran, relying purely on Seismic Mapping. He wasn't afraid of the criminals of the facility hurting him, even with Seismic Mapping alone, he was too good to be hit by them. Rui and Neira had abstained from using Apprentice-level techniques because they wanted to make sure the Martial Artist couldn't possibly realize they were Martial Apprentices.

"She's wiped-out squad C34." Neira cursed, accelerating. They were almost there.

BANG

They kicked open the door at the end of the corridor.

For a moment, everyone was speechless. Rui needed a few seconds to process what he was seeing.

But once he did, his blood boiled.

Thirteen girls, seven boys, shackled in cages, like animals. Bruises, cuts, wounds. Clear abuse and malnourishment. This alone made him feel murderous emotions, but that wasn't the worst of it.

What truly made snap was when he saw semen on one of the girls.

"You..."

His rage shook the air.

Never before had he felt such fury in his life.

His veins popped, struggling to contain the raging blood pulsing and coursing through them. His eyes were bloodshot, reddening with red cracks passing through them. He had clenched his fist so hard that his nails had dug into his skin, blood ebbing out of them.

His face was crumpled with rage. Every cell in his body wanted to kill the people in front of him. His bloodlust was so strong that even Neira flinched.

Out of then ten people that Neira and Rui had opened the door to, only one of them was standing still, unharmed by Rui's intense Apprentice-Realm bloodlust, the remaining nine had already plummeted to their knees.

The woman at the opposite end of the dock undeniably was the target of their mission. Her appearance was a little different from the sketch and the description of her features, but Rui was relatively certain

they had gotten a match. She had long blond hair that sashayed down to her waist, past a rather revealing outfit.

She had frozen in shock as she recognized the Apprentice-Realm auras of the two intruders, before immediately turning around and sprinting away.

Rui and Neira sprinted after her immediately. She was the very reason the two of them were even involved the mission in the first place. They absolutely could not allow her to escape under any circumstances whatsoever!

There was just one big problem, as they had soon come to realize.

"She's fast!" Rui cursed as he was unable to close the gap between them. Rui was using Parallel Walk, Helical Breathing, Balanced Direction and even Outer Convergence to move as fast as he possibly could. Yet she was even faster.

('Is she a maneuvering-oriented Martial Apprentice?') Rui couldn't help but wonder. She must have learnt many Apprentice-level maneuvering techniques in order to obtain the speed she was demonstrating.

Neira was slower than both of them, as she fell behind both Rui and the woman. It couldn't be helped; she was a close-range counter-offensive specialist, she was not accustomed to long drawn-out chases such as this.

The gap between Rui and the woman wasn't too much, she was marginally faster than him, but that didn't matter to Rui as much it would to normal human beings. Rui had already memorized her Seismic Signature. As long as the distance between them didn't exceed one hundred meters, Rui would precisely know her exact location at all times. There was no way he could possibly lose track of the heavy seismic radiation she was giving off with her many maneuvering techniques.

They sprinted through streets, alleys, over roof tops and in drainage tunnels. Rui didn't slip up a single time, although he couldn't prevent her from slowly opening the gap, he ensured that he didn't fall back significantly at any stage. He replicated every maneuver and direction she took and ensured he never faltered.

Rui didn't let her out of his vision even a single time. As time passed, just by observing her, he was able to make some inductions about her.

First, she wasn't really a Martial Artist. She was a Martial Artist, technically.

But not really.

She had a layer of fat over her body, and her untuned physique told Rui she likely didn't train frequently and probably hadn't truly trained in a long time. According to the intel, she ran away from every bust of her operation, which had struck him odd.

A Martial Apprentice had very little to fear from ordinary humans. Rui could understand eventually retreating, but running away at the first instance of discovery? If he was in her place, he would have wiped out the raid forces and ensured that he would be able to escape with his goods and valuables, but she abandoned the scene immediately this time and in prior instances.

This told Rui that she was barely a fighter with very little experience. It was quite likely that if he ever managed to get his hands on her, she wouldn't stand even the slightest chance of victory against him. she had probably mastered the maneuvering techniques she was displaying so that she would be able to escape in situations like these.

This just made Rui want to catch her even more.

Neira had already fallen quite behind and had stopped her pursuit, having realized it was hopeless. Her Thermal Eye had a much short range than Rui's Seismic Mapping, which meant she would inevitably lose track of Rui and their target. She could only pray that Rui would somehow capture her, though the chances of that were too low. She had instead taken it upon herself to brief special agent Barnard of what had occurred.

Rui on the other hand didn't stop. He simply ran and ran and ran, and then ran some more.

He didn't how he was going to stop her. He didn't have any strategy, for once. He only knew one thing.

"I don't care if I have to chase you to the end of the continent, I won't let you escape!" He swore.

Chapter 174: You'll Wish

Being a Martial Artist was not always easy. A lot of people who found their Martial Path were unable to tread deeply down it because they simply lacked the perseverance and dedication needed. Completing missions was not so easy when you were on the lower spectrum of the Martial Apprentice grade scale, you earned a decent amount, but that was about it.

That was why a lot of Martial Artists turned to the underworld, there were many alluring fruits within reach, poisoned as they may be.

Kate Kole remembered the first time she sold a child. She had earned more than ten times what she would normally earn as a low-grade Martial Apprentice of the Martial Union. And it was trivially easy too, capturing a single child from the backwaters of the Empire and shipping them to the commercial hub of the town of Hajin and selling them in the thriving underworld of the town required very little physical effort from her, compared to completing the often long, difficult and tiring missions of the Martial Union.

It was addicting. The first time she had kidnapped and trafficked a child, the sheer ease with which she was earning a larger sum of money had pulled her into the Underworld. She would never be able to go back to being regular Martial Artist. She went around changing her name time and time again, Martha Myers, Jenna Jill, Ciara Carter and so on and so forth. She had amassed an immense amount of wealth.

Of course, the Underworld came with its own fair share of detriments. There was a saying that there were only ten people in the Underworld who weren't exploited by someone else, the ten most powerful people in the Underworld. Everybody else below them served someone or the other and was at the mercy of someone or the other.

The moment she stepped foot into the Underworld, she was unable to escape. The demand for her goods was strong, and those that she had provided for would not let her go so easily. She was coerced to continue her child-trafficking business. Lest the Underworld sold her to the government once she was no longer of use, they had too much dirt on her.

Life in the Underworld was one of fear, fear of the Underworld, fear of the overworld. She could not stop trafficking children; she was not allowed to. She was constantly afraid that the Underworld she had stepped foot in would consume her, or spit her out into the open where the Empire would consume her instead.

Eventually, she had reached a stage where she was willing to give away all of the wealth she had built upon the heinous suffering of innocent children just to be able to sleep at night without wondering 'When are they going to come for me?'.

Today, she realized, just very well might be that day.

She turned around in fear as she saw Rui pursuing her relentlessly. This wasn't her first time being pursued by a Martial Apprentice. She was normally too fast for them to even keep up, she had managed to acquire many Apprentice-level maneuvering techniques in fear of being caught and mastered them to give her some sense of security. That in combination with her intimate familiarity with the town of Hajin allowed her to escape all her previous pursuers.

But not Rui. She didn't quite understand why he was so unshaken in his pursuit, when he was trying so hard. He was a Martial Artist of the Martial Union, not the government, this must have been a commission from the Bureau, so why was he expending so much effort when the mission clearly was not worth it?

She didn't know, but she didn't care. All she knew was that she had to get away from him. As long as she kept running, eventually she would leave him in the dust.

Or so she thought.

No matter how much she opened up the distance between them, he was still somehow able to keep pursuit of her! Even if she went through confounding paths, he always found his at her back.

('He has a sensory technique!') She cursed.

She would need to accelerate even further in order to get of his sensory range. This would take a long time.

A long time she didn't know if she could last.

She hadn't trained her body rigorously in seven years, and had let her body go with material indulgences. Her body had grown rusty, and her physical parameters had plummeted in the time that she had stopped training, more so than she had imagined. Her body had ached all over from stressing itself, her stamina was depleting already. Her lungs felt like they were on fire. Her joints felt like they were about to break apart and her bones felt like they were going to break. Her muscles were shaking with pain.

Rui on the other hand was unperturbed. His entire life, he had trained immensely, even prior to the Academy. Furthermore, once he entered the Academy, he had honed his body like a madman with his extreme potion tolerance.

He kept running, running and running some more, without ever faltering or slowing down.

Their physical foundations were in two entirely different Realms.

Kate had maintained hope that eventually Rui would give up but he didn't. He just ran like there was nothing holding him back.

Soon, a quarter of a day passed, and the two of them had already crisscrossed and circled around the town of Hajin multiple times.

Soon, the moment had arrived.

CRASH

In her fatigued and strained state, Kate had stumbled on a rock and crashed hard into the ground, painfully.

Yet the fear she experienced far surpassed the pain.

She didn't even need to turn around. She could feel the weight of his mind pressuring her instinctive and primal sense of danger.

"Aargh!" She screamed as Rui grasped her hair before she could even turn around. He didn't utter a word, the glare in his eyes spoke for itself.

"LET ME GO!" She screamed. "HELP! SAVE ME!" She cried to the onlooking passersby.

CRACK

"AAAAARRRGH!" She screeched as excruciating pain shot up from her leg. She turned around and saw her shin broken cleanly, bent at a grotesque angle.

"LET ME GO PLEASE!" She grasped his knees.

CRACK

"AAAAAAHHHRRHH!" She screeched even more loudly as Rui cleanly crushed her second leg.

She no longer had any escape.

"HAVE MERCY." She half-wailed, half-screached. "LET ME GO!!" She banged her hands against him with some feeble offense-oriented techniques as he dragged her by the hair.

"I'm sure those children said the same thing to you." Rui whispered, turning to glance at her.

The glare in his eye shook her.

"I may not be able to kill you, but it's a long way to the Bureau headquarters. By the time we reach it, you'll wish you were dead."

Chapter 175: Make The Best Of It

That day, word of a strange sight spread around the town of Hajin that day. A Martial Artist of the Martial Union bearing the Royal Insignia had dragged a woman by her hair all the way from the outskirts of the town of Hajin to the central district. It was a sight that reinstated the fear in the civilians had in the Martial Artists of the Empire.

Considering the Martial Artist seemed to be from the Martial Union and the Kandrian government, it probably meant that that woman had fucked up big time. If that treatment of the woman was unjustified, it would not have been done so publicly. The fact that she was being treated so horribly out in the open meant that she was being used as an example by the Kandrian government and the Martial Union, this was the conclusion people came to.

Of course, they couldn't be more wrong. Rui honestly just didn't care for the optics. He didn't want to start sprinting with her already mangled body. There was a chance she might actually die if he was too rough, as much as he would have loved to kill her, giving her to the Kandrian Bureau of Investigation would probably save more lives.

She had valuable intelligence to offer regarding the child-trafficking industry, without a doubt. Suppliers, traffickers, purchasers and consumers. The hidden identities of these people that had lurked around in the shadows could potentially be exposed and uprooted by the Bureau and the Martial Union based on her intelligence.

He had covered her face in a mask, and wrapped up most of her body in cloth, even her hair. He did this because he did not want anyone identifying her.

Of course, common citizens would have no clue who she was, but those in the know would realize that she'd been caught, and they might get exposed. He had been exceedingly meticulous and had ensured that there was almost no chance of that happening.

The only thing that could be inferred about her was that she was a female adult, given the size of her voluptuous breasts.

Soon enough Rui had reached the Bureau headquarters. It had taken him a while to get past the general bewilderment of the front reception staff and guards, but eventually he was greeted by several members of the team he was assigned.

"You son of a musket." Barnard revealed a grudging smirk. "You actually did it, you madman."

Several others chipped in as well.

"We knew you had it in you!"

"I knew he was capable the second I laid eyes on him."

"As expected of a Martial Artist."

"Why do I recall you saying the exact opposite when we first met?" Rui grumbled, but inwardly he couldn't help but feel just a tiny bit validated.

"Great job." Neira beamed at him. "You singlehandedly fulfilled one of the main objectives of the mission." She said before sighing. "In comparison, I was rather useless."

"It's just a matter of compatibility." Rui consoled. "It would be unreasonable to expect someone with your specialty to accomplish much more than what you did."

He turned to Barnard. "How are the children?"

His face turned grim. "Physically? Just fine. We rejuvenated and healed them up in a jiffy. Those with infections and other conditions were promptly given immediate medical attention and will make a full recovery." he said, pausing before continuing. "But mentally..."

He shook his head.

Rui nodded. It would be rather strange if the children's mental health was perfect. He expected pretty much all of them would bear these wounds and scars for pretty much their entire lives. It would permanently alter and shape who they grow up to be. He couldn't have expected the horrors they endured, and the even more horrifying effects it had on their psyche.

He could only hope they would heal, a slim, feeble hope.

He had succeeded in fulfilling the main objective. Taking down the bitch would undoubtedly save many, many more children out there, and her intelligence and information would also do the same.

But the damage had already been inflicted. He found it hard to be too happy about the mission, not after what he'd witnessed. But there was the silver lining that his goal of eliminating the risk the Quarrier Orphanage was under, had been completed.

"Good work, your job is almost done." Effels, his supervisor stated. "Now you just have to complete some post-mission protocols here." She said, handing over a stack of papers that he needed to sign. Rui sighed as he got to work.

('That took forever.') He thought, once he finished.

He bade goodbye to them once he was done, returning to the Martial Union.

On the way back, he gathered his thoughts on the mission. He had chosen to get into an offense-oriented mission because he wanted to gain some experience with active hostile conflict with other Martial Apprentices, but this mission was anything but that.

He had experienced more head-on conflicts in his bodyguard missions and his sole hunting mission. Which was definitely not what he was expecting. So to some degree, he was a bit disappointed.

('Well at least the mission ended in less than half a day.') Rui shrugged. He had gotten a decent number of credits for it too.

('Now what...?') He wondered. He was still quite energized after having taken a rejuvenation potion, he didn't feel like taking a break or rest. He had already slept for nine hours the previous night.

('Another mission it is...') Rui shrugged. He had little over seven months before the Kandrian Martial Festival arrived. The preliminaries were scheduled one month before the actual interschool contest. Which meant he really only had six months, he had already scheduled one month after his training for adjusting and refining his usage of the new technique he had learnt into his Martial Art.

That left five months.

He needed four months for training, generally.

That left one month.

One month of missions, four months of training, one month of refinement.

And the preliminaries would begin.

('The next one month is crucial, I have to make the best of it.')

Chapter 176: No Stone Unturned

And just like that, a month had passed.

Rui had taken up several missions, aiming for missions of the higher remuneration in the shortest amount of time within his difficulty grade. He had taken up a total of six missions in the past month. Five bodyguard missions, two hunting-class missions and one offense-class mission.

He had racked up a total of six hundred and forty martial credits, that in addition to the martial credits he had earned from the earthen basilisk mission as well as the royal mission immediately after yielded to a total of one thousand two hundred and twenty martial credits!

Rui was happy that he had managed to hit four digits by the end of the month. This means he had access to a lot of the good stuff!

You couldn't buy multiple high-grade techniques with just a measly hundred or two hundred martial credits. He was satisfied with his reserve, especially since he couldn't acquire anymore. He had run out of time.

The next five months would fully be dedicated to getting stronger. After that, the long-awaited Kandrian Martial Festival will have finally arrived.

But, he was experiencing a problem he hadn't ever experienced before.

He had absolutely no idea what techniques to purchase!

Of course, even normally when he was about to purchase technique, he usually didn't have a precise idea of exactly what techniques in the Apprentice library he wanted to purchase. But, he knew what kind of techniques he wanted to purchase, and what conditions they had to satisfy for him to purchase them.

For his very first training round, he needed to procure foundational Apprentice-level techniques in all basic fields. At that point, he had no Apprentice-level techniques at all. It was embarrassing to even call himself a proper Martial Apprentice. He had been desperately trying to take the first step in forming the basic foundation.

The second training round had been centered around filling the large gaping holes in his variety and diversity. By purchasing some grappling and wrestling techniques, as well as a finishing strike and some defensive and counter-offensive moves. He had expanded the limits of his options from merely Vital Pressure striking to many ways through which he could take his opponent down.

The third round had bolstered the potency of his Martial Art. Outer Convergence had given it a foundational and fundamental boost in power and speed, while Inner Divergence had given him the ability to endure. Blink gave him the option of exploiting opening that he previously could not exploit while Seismic Sensing closed off many opening that his opponents would normally be able to exploit, but now couldn't. This round had generally increased his overall formidability quite well, and in a well distributed fashion, too.

He had entered each round of training with a clear specific defined goal.

So what was the problem here?

('The problem is...') Rui thought to himself. ('I don't have any specific criterion for the individual techniques I want to purchase.')

He knew he wanted to master the techniques that would allow him to win the Martial Academic Contest in the Kandrian Martial Festival, but he didn't know what those techniques were.

Should he purchase some more power-boosting techniques like Outer Convergence? Hoping that the immense power he would generate would win him the contest?

Or perhaps, he should purchase some more maneuvering-oriented techniques like Parallel Walk and instead hope that his evasiveness will ensure his defeat doesn't occur?

Maybe he should go down the Dalen path and boost his already solid defense even further?

Or perhaps the Milliana path and ensure he could fight for long period of time? The VOID algorithm did like time, after all.

He wasn't sure. They were all alluring options, in all honesty. He simply didn't know which of the many paths he ought to go down. Hell, he could even partially travel down multiple paths.

Part of the reason he was so indecisive about which path to go down was because he didn't know which path was most suited for the Martial Academy Contest that would be hosted together by all sixteen Martial Academies across the entirety of the Kandrian Empire.

It was a national-level tournament!

The winner of the contest would be crowned the strongest Martial Apprentice of their generation!

Yet as much as Rui had been looking forward to this, he realized he didn't know too much about the details. Part of it was because it felt so distant, just a while back it was a year away, and now suddenly Rui had only five months of training and refinement left.

Another part of it was that he had simply been too busy. Every hour mattered to Rui. He grinded, rested appropriately and then grinded some more missions. It had always been at the back of his mind, but now that the time to begin his fourth training stage had come, it had immediately and abruptly come to the front of his mind now.

"I suppose I can come back to this decision once I learn more about the tournament." Rui shrugged. "No point in breaking my head over and over."

He wasn't able to come to a decision right away, and he would hate to waste his precious martial credits on a technique he would end up regretting buying. Martial credits were precious and had to be earned through blood, sweat and tears.

"The Academy doesn't offer refunds either."

He made up his mind, he would immerse himself in the happenings of the Martial Academic Contest before making his mind up, perhaps he would ask his instructors or friends too.

He already knew the format and general rules and facts, but surely people with much more experience with the Contest would have more insight and information to offer. Maybe not game changing, but insightful enough.

Even the tiniest bit of a hint would be enough to make up his mind and choices that he would go through with confidence.

He wished to have left no stone unturned.

"The Martial Contest?" Squire Kyrie echoed, glancing at Rui.

"That's right." Rui said, nodding. "I'm about enter training for the Martial Contest. But, I'm not sure what kind of techniques to purchase. I was wondering if you had any advice for me?"

In the past day he had spoken to multiple people. His friends, some instructors, some old instructors, he had received a diverse array of opinions.

Kane had told him he should improve his evasive maneuvering. Fae had told he should consider improving his striking. Dalen and Milliana had respectively told him to consider improving his defense and stamina.

He wasn't sure. He had hoped that consulting others would give him some clarity, but frankly, it only made him more conflicted.

There were many good arguments for each of the options he had been presented.

"What does the Martial Contest have to with the development of your Martial Art?" Kyrie asked.

"Huh?" Rui tilted his head in confusion. "What does it have to with the development of my Martial Art? I want to compete in and win the Martial Contest. For that, I have to grow stronger."

He replied with a confused expression.

Squire Kyrie didn't respond immediately, taking her time to ponder about his words. "You know... I won the Martial Contest back when I was still in the Academy and was crowned the Martial Princess."

"What??" Rui turned to her in shock and surprise. "I did not know that."

"It was a long time ago." Kyrie smiled wryly. "So long ago, that it doesn't even matter now. It's insignificant, even though I was crowned champion." She said, throwing pointed look at Rui

He frowned at those words. He was cognizant enough to sense that her words had meaning, she was trying to convey something.

"Insignificant? The Martial Contest?" He murmured with a skeptical look.

The Kandrian Martial Festival was held once every five years. Its infrequency ensured that whenever the Festival did eventually roll around, it had a lot of weight. It drew in attention from not just the entire Empire, but even surrounding nations as well!

The Sekigahara Confederate, the Britannia Empire and the Republic of Gorteau all sent delegates to the Kandrian Empire during the Festival, to engage in some diplomatic show of goodwill.

At the center of the Kandrian Martial Festival lied the inter-academic Martial Contest held by the sixteen Martial Academies across the Kandrian Empire.

Sixteen representatives, four rounds, one champion. Glory. Prestige. Wealth.

How could such an event be insignificant?

"What's more important to you?" She asked. "Reaching Martial Squire, or winning the Martial Contest?"

"Reaching Martial Squire." Rui replied unhesitantly. As much as he wanted to win the Martial Contest, reaching Martial Squire was far stronger a desire for Rui than anything else. His ultimate goal was to pursue his Martial Art and traverse his Martial Path forever, he did not want to ever want to die constrained ever again. The first time was bad enough.

If he could not reach Martial Squire, then it meant he had hit a dead end in his Martial Path and Martial Art.

That was not something he was willing to tolerate, in comparison, the Martial Contest was indeed inconsequential.

"Can't I pursue both?" Rui frowned, becoming a Martial Squire didn't mean he couldn't participate in the Martial Contest, and participating in the Martial Contest didn't mean he couldn't become a Martial Squire. So why did it sound like Squire Kyrie was insinuating this?

"Can you?" She asked.

"Can't I?"

"Tell me. How would you have gone on training if the Martial Contest did not exist?" She asked, in turn.

Rui remained silent at that question.

"At the very least, would your normal training be different from that of your Martial Contest training?" She asked.

"Probably."

"How do you think you'll reach Martial Squire if you allow something like the Martial Contest to dictate your Martial Path?" Squire Kyrie asked him.

Rui's eyes flew wide open at those words. He understood what she was trying to convey.

"Training shapes your Martial Art and Martial Path." She said. "The influence your training has on your Martial Art and your Martial Path cannot be changed too easily. With that in mind, do you think altering training for the sake of the Martial Contest is conducive to your goal?"

Rui shook his head. It wasn't. She definitely had a point. The Martial Contest was not his end goal, he should not bend his Martial Path towards it, as that would inevitably mean it is bending away from its original path. What was the point of training for the Martial Contest specifically?

The Martial Contest occurred once every five years. He would really only get to participate in it once. After that, it was no longer relevant. It was not worth altering his original Martial Path.

Instead, he should simply train for the sake of his Martial Art itself, and not for anything or anybody else.

"Thank you for your guidance, instructor Kyrie." Rui was grateful. He had gotten bit too fixated on the Contest itself. He was still excited for the Martial Contest, and still intended to grow stronger. But the difference was he was not willing to influence his Martial Path for the sake of the Contest.

He could still train for the Martial Contest to a lower level, within his Martial Path, but he wasn't willing to change his course. Even if the techniques he chose weren't precisely the best for the Martial Contest, he would still choose to master them if he believed that these techniques were faithful to his Martial Path.

Kyrie nodded with a hint of approval. "Good luck. I look forward to your performance in the Martial Contest and the Festival. But never forget, your Path goes far beyond them."

Rui nodded. "Thank you." Before biding her farewell and heading to the Apprentice Library.

His mind was no longer consumed by the incessant thoughts of the Martial Festival.

"My Martial Art is the VOID algorithm. And my Martial Path is Project Water." He whispered to himself. "I'll do whatever it takes to achieve my dreams."

He stopped, having reached the gates to the Apprentice Library.

Chapter 178: First Choice

Had he instantly figured out what kind of techniques he wanted to purchase at this point in time?

No.

But at the very least he knew what he didn't want to do.

He didn't want to focus exclusively on any one field, he was an all-rounder and that didn't change. He was previously considering taking the suggestions of his friends and dialing down and focusing on the fields that may be the most useful in the Martial Contest setting, but he decided against that.

"That is not my Martial path." He shook his head, as he entered the Apprentice Library.

It was time to make his choices.

('What is something I would really like my Martial Art to obtain in this round of training?') Rui asked himself.

Well, this question was harder to answer than before because his Martial Art did not have very obvious needs anymore, being well-rounded enough with fourteen Apprentice-level techniques.

He put aside logical deduction for one second. What was it that he truly wanted to for his Martial Art? He looked inside, trying to gauge his emotions. Staying true to himself was the key to staying faithful to his Martial Path.

It had taken him a while, but he had come to a realization.

('I wish my Martial Art had more lethality.') He realized, recalling his dissatisfaction during the hunting-class mission being unable to take the earthen basilisk down in a shorter period of time.

His offense was limited to Outer Convergence, Flowing Canon, Binding lash and Mirage Dive.

This made for a decent amount of variety, for sure. But it lacked the level of lethality he wished he had. The kind of attack that could do serious damage to his opponent if well-landed.

Usually, these techniques had a high difficulty of mastery or were extremely high-grade and thus super pricy.

But now, atleast he had an objective. Was it the best course of action for the Martial Contest? Probably not, the Martial Contest had a non-killing or crippling rule, which restricted how much lethality he could use. Was he going to change his choice even if it wasn't the most optimal choice?

No.

This was his Martial Path, not that of the Martial Contest.

He set out to the offense-oriented section, looking for various techniques. The only place he could possibly find lethal techniques would be in the offense-oriented section, after all.

There he once again came to marvel at how diverse the Martial techniques on Gaea were.

[Hypnotic Claw]

A technique where one condition the tip of one's fingers and nails to produce to be saturated with a potent venom that caused drowsiness. This was a technique that first required the user to spend months building up a strong tolerance to this venom by controlled administration of doses of the poison. Only then could the finger tips and nails be conditioned to produce this venom. Over the course of a fight, constant exposure of the venom to the user's opponent via the Hypnotic Claw would cause induced hypnosis unless the opponent's poison resistance is quite high.

Rui shook his head in disbelief. He still had vaguely mixed feelings about using poison to fight, but clearly, in this world, Martial Art had a much broader scope than the martial arts of Earth.

He might have been tempted to train in the technique anyway if not for the fact that it had downsides to it. He would be unable to train in any other technique whilst training this technique and he would need to wear gloves permanently for the rest of his life, because this technique would make put people to sleep whether he liked it or not.

He put it aside, skimming through some other choices.

He ran into many techniques that were capable of inflicting serious damage to their opponent or seriously incapacitating them leaving them vulnerable. Techniques centered around friction, body temperature manipulation, force permeation, nerve striking, flesh tearing, artery targeting, oxygen deprivation and many other absurd techniques.

Many of these techniques were extremely pricey, and were far too niche or had too much of a difficulty grade.

This was to be expected, the power to instantly defeat or kill Martial Apprentices could not be easy to obtain!

If these techniques were not super-difficult to master, then Martial Apprentices would be dropping like flies!

One particular technique was especially absurd, its very existence shocked him.

[Heart Permeation]

A jabbing technique that manipulated the impact of the jab such that the impact did not do damage to the skin, flesh, muscles or bone in the chest area, but permeated all the way inside from the outside to the heart. The impact would cause an instant cardiac arrest and would kill the target of the technique within seconds if well-executed.

"What???" Rui exclaimed. A single jab that could kill a Martial Apprentice instantly??? He had not thought it was possible. He hadn't ever gone through the higher-graded techniques in the Apprentice Library this extensively before. After all, he was still solidifying his foundation in the prior training stages, so he hadn't ever seen this technique.

This technique costed one thousand martial credits, and had a grade ten difficulty. Which corresponded to a one-percent successful mastery rate.

Only one percent of Martial Apprentices who purchased this technique had mastered it!

Even the Martial Academy didn't have that many martial Apprentices at that moment!

Rui was sure whoever mastered that technique would instantly be the most dangerous Martial Artist in the Academy.

Thankfully, it was absurdly difficult to master. He was definitely not purchasing it at this juncture.

Just as he was inspecting the other techniques, something interesting caught his eye.

[Stinger]

This was a kicking-based piercing technique that involved conditioning the first toe of the foot from merely a toe to weapon meant to blast holes in the target of the technique. The toe would be rigorously conditioned on a skeletal, flesh and epithelial level. It would effectively be re-engineered into an unstoppable bullet.

When fully completed and mastered. The Stinger allowed the user to launch swift front kicks that left a four-centimeter-long hole as wide as a toe in everything it touched!

This one move could singlehandedly win him a fight and turn the tables in losing battles.

Furthermore, this technique had a rather relatively reasonable price compared to the others because of its high difficulty. The difficulty of the technique stemming from the long, painful conditioning process of the training. It had a high potency grade despite its price for this reason. It required to perseverance.

If Rui purchased this technique, he will have gotten a huge boost in lethality while still retaining enough martial credits to purchase a few more techniques.

"Alright, I've decided." Rui's eyes narrowed with determination. "This will be my first choice."

Chapter 179: Phantom Step

He picked the scroll for the technique out of the slot, examining it happily. He was quite satisfied with the significant improvement to his lethality.

The technique costed around four hundred martial credits, despite the fact that it could cause more damage. The reason for this was because the Stinger had very low flexibility. It could be executed as a straight kick, or side kicks, to varying heights. But the fact of the matter was it required a leg, and unless the user trained the large toes of both feet for the technique, it could only be used with one leg.

Outer Convergence was less devastating with every attack, but fundamentally boosted the power and speed of nearly all Martial maneuvers in general. It wasn't limited to one leg or one type of attack and could even boost other fields if used cleverly. But it lacked the lethality, in turn.

The two techniques were equally high-grade with high-difficulty of mastery that made them more affordable, and had different strengths and weaknesses.

With this, Rui's offense was not to be messed with, he was probably still inferior to Fae in this regard, but he should still be comparable enough to her in this regard once he mastered this technique.

He moved on, stepping out of the offense-oriented section. He had no intention of purchasing any more pure offensive techniques.

When he walked out, he paused.

('Now what?') Rui wondered. He wasn't sure. He sauntered around a bit, eying the different sections in the Apprentice Library, as they eventually settled on one.

The maneuvering section.

('It's been a while since I've visited that section.') Rui mused. He hadn't purchased a maneuvering-oriented technique since he purchased Parallel Walk two training sessions ago.

('That was a long ass time ago.') Rui felt nostalgic.

It actually was less than a year ago, but so much had happened since then, that Rui felt it was truly a long time ago.

He shrugged. It was as good a choice as any. He didn't even necessarily have to pick a maneuvering technique either. If he didn't like what he was seeing, he could just move on. There was no reason to pick something he didn't want to pick.

He came across the many techniques held in the maneuvering section, many of which he had seen before.

[Godspeed]

A technique that allows the user to momentarily surpass the speed of sound by accumulating power in the form of muscular potential energy, allowing them to surpass the reaction time of most Martial Apprentices, launching a clean knockout blow that was almost impossible to avoid.

It was one of the few techniques of the entire library technique that had grade ten difficulty, just like Heart Permeation, Void Step and All-Seeing Eye.

Rui was aware of the technique, this was the technique with which Kane had beaten Fae singlehandedly, and the technique that had forced Kyrie to stop holding back and limiting herself. It was an incredible technique with highest of efficiencies. If successfully well-executed, Rui doubted there was a single Martial Apprentice that could avoid being defeated. Even Fae, who was among the strongest offense specialists in the Academy could barely launch a failed counter before she got knocked out.

The technique had some significant conditions and drawbacks, otherwise Kane would just go around one-shotting Martial Apprentices like he was a Martial Squire!

Still, the fact that Kane mastered it in half a year was impressive, because this was the kind of technique that took several years of unhindered dedicated training to master.

When it came to mastering maneuvering techniques, Kane was unrivalled. Not even Rui with his reincarnated-enhanced mind and reincarnated-enhanced potion tolerance was above him in this particular regard. He could just drink up maneuvering techniques like they were juice.

The reason he was still slower than Rui on average was because he was average at learning techniques from other fields.

Still, Rui didn't think he could master Godspeed, nor did he feel the urge to so he left it at that.

He went through the many techniques, many of which he had seen before, many of which were new, until he stumbled upon something interesting.

[Phantom Step]

A technique centered around creating illusions with extremely high-quality convincing feints based on accurate and precise trajectories as well as appropriate shifts in center of gravity.

It was a technique with equal amounts of flexibility and high-efficiency, which resulted in an overall high-quality technique, it was quite reasonably priced too.

This wasn't the first time Rui had seen techniques with the concept of feinting incorporated into them. In fact, he had mastered one himself.

Mirage Dive was a technique that he had mastered two training stages ago. It used a feint grappling attack to create an opening for a takedown.

"Hmm..." Rui pondered. This technique was a variable that would allow him to create variables to end the battle or turn around a losing battle by exploiting an opening created by the technique. Furthermore, this technique's surprise effects could be used synergistically with the surprise effects of Blink, and also could be used as a tool to successfully land the Stinger kick.

He could increase the likelihood of all his techniques working better directly or indirectly thanks to Phantom Step!

All in all, it had good compatibility and synergy with his existing techniques and Martial Art.

"Alright then." Rui plopped the scroll out of the slot and walked away from the maneuvering section.

The technique had costed around three hundred and eighty martial credits. Not unreasonable given what it was touted to be capable of. Along with the Stinger technique, his total expenditure was seven hundred and eighty martial credits.

Leaving him a remaining of four hundred and forty martial credits.

"Enough for one high-grade technique, or two mediocre techniques." He mused. He didn't even consider purchasing mediocre techniques, if he wanted those, he could go back to the foundational techniques and pick four or five techniques from there.

His Martial Art had already developed to a point where it needed high-quality techniques to grow significantly stronger!

"That leaves one last technique."

Chapter 180: Final technique

One technique to go.

Rui truly had no idea this time. He had picked one offense-class technique, one maneuvering technique, following this pattern, wouldn't it make sense to pick a defense-class technique?

Rui glanced at the defense-class section, before shaking his head.

('My defense is solid enough.') He had already mastered three defensive techniques that were extremely synergetic with the VOID algorithm. He didn't feel the need to beef up his defense just yet, at the very least he didn't need to add another endurance technique, maybe he could consider adding some other form of defense?

But for now, he didn't intend to go into the defense-class section, instead, he was quite interested in another section in particular.

The miscellaneous section.

The miscellaneous section was the largest of all sections in the library because it contained many sizable sub-sections across it.

Environment-class techniques, beast-class techniques, labour-class techniques, weapon-class techniques, stealth-class techniques, sensory-class techniques. It contained many interesting techniques of various sorts.

He didn't care to go through many of these classes of techniques, half of these were far too early for him, he felt. Especially, the weapon-class techniques. Further, not all of these techniques were super-useful to him either. The miscellaneous section had some rather funny techniques as well.

[Mind Palace]

This technique effectively gave the user a perfect memory. It was a technique developed for Martial Artists who had trouble remembering the vast amounts of information that mission bills often had. It also allowed martial Artists to remember many other important pieces of information like the protocols and guidelines of different classes of information as well. Meant for Martial Apprentices who were mentally challenged to some degree.

Difficulty grade: Five.

Cost: Free

Rui almost burst out laughing. The Martial Union actually added an Apprentice-level technique for incompetent Martial Apprentices who had difficulty memorizing information that needed to be memorized for completing missions. Just how many instances of incompetency did they have, before they decided to add this technique?

They even made the technique free of cost so that Martial Apprentices would have no qualms purchasing it!

He shook his head, chuckling. He began skimming through some classes of techniques he had already visited prior in his previous visit to the Apprentice Library.

The Sensory-Class.

He had recalled some particularly interesting techniques in this section when he saw it in the Miscellaneous section. Just as he skimmed through the section, something interesting caught his eye.

[Primordial Instinct]

A technique that trained the danger evaluation intuition of the user, allowing them to subconsciously detect dangerous phenomena within a certain range.

"This..."

This was a technique he recalled seeing back when he picked out Seismic Mapping. He'd been pretty intrigued by it at the time, but eventually picked Seismic Mapping because Seismic Mapping had far greater range, whereas Primordial Instinct was a combat-oriented technique.

('That was a such a great decision, in hindsight.') Rui realized.

Had he picked Primordial Instinct instead of Seismic Mapping, he wouldn't have been able to complete the earthen basilisk mission, or the child-trafficking mission either. Mostly because Primordial Instinct wouldn't be of much use in those particular situation

However, Primordial Instinct shined in combat, in turn. While Seismic Mapping, in combat, could only be used to ascertain his opponent's position and general movements, Primordial Instinct could accomplish far more.

This was a technique that trained the human subconscious danger sensing and evaluation capability as well as the human subconscious precognition. It basically evolved his mind's capacity to sense danger and predict future instinctively and subconsciously.

Ordinarily, these mental parameters were fixed and static, and had very little room for intrinsic improvement. But this wasn't true for Martial Apprentices. Martial Apprentices possessed superhuman neurology as a result of the evolution and enhancement provided by the breakthrough to Martial Apprentice and the discovery of the Martial Path.

Unlike normal humans, the subconscious danger and predictive instinct could be improved, and had the potential to be much greater. It need only be trained in the appropriate manner.

Once mastered, the description of the technique professed that one could be able to predict their opponent's much deeper than before, and would be able to instinctively sense and evaluate danger across their surroundings in all directions to a far higher degree than before. It became drastically much harder for the user to be caught off-guard.

Rui had begun to strongly suspect that the Primordial Instinct technique had a strong compatibility with the VOID algorithm. The reason for this was because the predictive mechanism of the VOID algorithm was different from the predictive mechanism of the Primordial Instinct technique.

The VOID algorithm predicted the user's opponents by in putting variables into an algorithmic system that outputted the opponent's future moves as well as the ideal ways to counter depending on what the user wanted to accomplish. It was fundamentally founded on data science and a deep understanding about the fundamental nature of physical conflict.

The Primordial Instinct's predictive prowess instead was founded on the mind's subconscious inexplicable ability to extrapolate the future from the present.

If the two had no overlap, then they could cooperate with no friction of any kind. Rui would be able to combine the predictive prowess of the Primordial Instinct technique with that of the VOID algorithm to truly peer into the future!

Furthermore, the danger sensing ability of the Primordial Instinct technique was quite impressive as well.

If Rui wasn't wrong, the danger sensing aspect of this technique could be integrated into the VOID algorithm as an extra variable to input. With even greater amounts of information available, the VOID algorithm's results would surely be even more refined, precise and accurate!

"This could serve as the first step to adapting the VOID algorithm to the world of Gaea!" Rui exclaimed with ecstasy; he was quite pleased with this epiphany.

With all of these considerations, the Primordial Instinct technique might actually have the greatest compatibility with his Martial Art compared to the other two techniques he had chosen!

Furthermore, almost as if it was telling him something, the price of the technique was just barely within his remaining budget.

He nodded, plucking the scroll out of its slow. Adding it to pouch along with the other two.

The Stinger.

Phantom Step.

Primordial Instinct.

These would be the three techniques he intended to master. With these techniques, he intended to reach another level of power!